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A Vet's Commentary



by Stan Lowe, WVC Chairman (retired) and
Editor Emeritus

FAREWELL – BUT NOT GOODBYE

A year and a half ago, I stepped down as editor of this publication only to resume that position a short three months later. That was because I still stayed on as Chairman, which is not the case now, given my decision to refuse re-election as Chairman this year and end my duties as a Commissioner effective 1 September.

The fast pace and long hours of the Commission's work without any paid full-time support staff have taken their toll on this 80-year-old guy. Recalling the strong support given the veterans movement by the Legislature in this year's session, I am confident the desperately needed support staff problem will be resolved by the 2004 Legislature. Then why didn't I stay on? I just don't have the stamina to hang on another year working at the same pace and hours until the authorization to hire the needed staff people becomes effective a year from now. I'm sorry.

I delayed making a final decision to give it more thought. I was tempted to stay on anyway. My deeply felt, strong commitment to all of our 57,000 veterans is well known, but I was concerned that my departure might be misinterpreted as a signal that I was leaving them in the lurch. Especially those 80% that don't belong to any veterans organizations. I most certainly did not want that.

As the organizational meeting of the new Commissioners on Friday, 18 July neared, I had to make a decision. I concluded that since my commitment to our 57,000 veterans is very well known, they would realize I will always be there when needed to speak up for them either on or off the Commission. So, the day before the meeting, I mailed the following letter to Governor Dave Freudenthal and announced my decision at the beginning of the meeting.

Governor Dave Freudenthal
State Capitol
Cheyenne, Wyoming 82002

Dear Governor Freudenthal:

I decided not to allow my name to be placed in nomination for the office of chairman at the organizational meeting of the new Veterans' Commission. Let me explain.

I have given this a lot of thought. The extraordinarily fast pace of the work of the Commission and the long hours of work due to having no full time paid support staff, requiring me to work until midnight or later virtually every night including most weekends, is taking its toll of this 80 year-old man. Too, I miss having some time for recreation and entertainment to provide a change of atmosphere for me. Looking at my boat setting in the front yard and my golf clubs in the locker every summer are comforting to behold but not very relaxing or healthful recreation away from my computer. Too, the ability to spend more than just a few minutes occasionally with my grandchildren would be nice.

Let me hasten to add, my decision was not motivated by the thousands of dollars I have personally spent out of my pocket on the Commission and its mission to fulfill my obligations in this non-paid position. I look upon what I have done as a wise investment on behalf of the 57,000 veterans of my home state, and I gained a million dollars a year satisfaction from doing it.

Speaking of satisfaction, I am proud of what the Commission has accomplished in these past six years while I was chairman. When I first was appointed to the Commission by Governor Mike Sullivan in 1994 and learned that the Commission, after being established in 1975, never once opened a state office to serve the needs of Wyoming's veterans appalled me. It prompted me, as soon as I became chairman in 1996, to recommend to the Commission that I be authorized to get one established. The members were equally concerned, of course, and readily agreed. Finally, in 1997 I was able to report that I had located a rent-free space in the local Army National Guard Armory. By pleading and begging state and federal agencies, I was able to furnish the office with furniture and office equipment. By conserving jealously the \$5,300 biennial appropriation by which the Legislature had funded the Commission, we installed a telephone line, bought some paper, envelopes and pencils, and I donated a few things, and this enabled us to open the doors of the Commission on

27,

1997.

We right away instituted the basic function of a state commission, i.e., outreach to our veterans so they would know that at long last there was a state office available to help them. Our major concern were those 45,000 (80%) that do not belong to veterans' organizations. At first, our principal ways of outreach were: (1) talks the other commissioners and I gave around the state every time we got a chance and (2) the monthly newsletter, WY-VETS NEWS, that went out to every veteran for whom we could get a mailing address. An added plus provided by the newsletter were the donations veterans and their organizations sent in to help the Commission's pathetically poor financial picture.

We solicited veterans and their wives to volunteer their services in the office. Their contribution of answering the telephone, helping with large mailings (such as the newsletter every month for the first couple years) and incidental office work was very helpful. Too, we were able to get a VA-paid veteran student from Casper College, under the VA's work-study program, to work on the computer given us by a federal agency. This first student, Greg Schulz, was outstanding. Without him and what he contributed, the office would have been a long time getting started.

Having an office was truly a Godsend. Before that, veterans just simply called my home and added letters to my mailman's load. Since I was working fulltime then, my poor wife Pat got saddled with answering the phone and keeping notes on the calls until I got home that night to do the callbacks. One time the VFW magazine had an article on state commissions, and of course it listed my home telephone number. Pat literally was not able to get away from that telephone table for over two weeks. TV dinners, McDonald's and an occasional delivered Kentucky fried chicken or pizza were the sole source of sustenance in the Lowe household.

The next project was to update a book put together by some veterans' service people. It was named VETERANS BENEFITS. Those fellows and their secretaries had got the basic information, telephoned to update telephone numbers and addresses, and wrote the text of the earlier version of that book. When the Commission did it, Greg and I were left with that task, and I guess it was about then that the midnight working hours began, never to cease afterwards.

We were constantly slowed and even held back by challenges, such as breakdowns in the old, used equipment we had inherited from the state and federal agencies. This always seemed to happen as we were rushing to meet a time deadline or a major mail out. In fact, until I bought and paid for a brand new computer for my personal office last year, I cannot recall a monthly publication of WY-VETS NEWS that I wasn't frustrated beyond human limitations as I desperately tried to get that out timely to meet the printer's schedule.

These stages and steps, plus literally dozens of others I won't belabor because many are covered in the Attachment to this letter, brought the Commission into full operation, in a manner of speaking. That is, it was as best we were able to do without a paid full-time support staff. This staffing factor placed severe limitations on my time to do my job as chairman and acting director as well as I would have liked.

We grew fast from the very beginning because of the general awareness of the great need that exists for a working state veterans office. So, beginning in

1999 we began to reach out to the Legislature for help. We desperately needed a state veterans service officer first to continue the momentum of our outreach efforts. After that we needed a state director just as much to run the office, carry out the programs soon to be initiated and work with the veterans service officer in helping veterans. Our first effort to get a service officer in 1999 was defeated, but out of it came a surprise: An appropriation of \$35,000 to expand our operations. This we did quickly with another outreach tool, a toll-free telephone line to encourage people to call the state office so we could help more of them.

The 2000 and 2001 legislative sessions were defining moments in the Commission's history as shown in more detail in the Attachment to this letter. Out of those very difficult sessions came much good: A veterans service officer, Barry Gasdek, in June 2000, and a director, Ron Franck, in June 2001. Too, the license plate service emblems were approved to raise funding for the Commission's projects and programs.

From that time, the efforts of the Commission have expanded beyond the informational and assistance stage to the more dynamic aspect of service to veterans, namely, initiating programs to enhance their self respect and pride in serving and to reflect a grateful state's appreciation for what they did for our nation. We started getting programs adopted here in Wyoming, the last state to have a state office doing something for all of its veterans, that other states have been doing for their veterans for anywhere from thirty to fifty years.

In taking these steps, we had to be constantly mindful of the Commission's limitations due to lack of money and support staffing. We knew we dared not be too ambitious and end up overloaded with projects that would be too time demanding or initiate programs and activities that might bog down the small paid staff we do have. On the other hand, a review of the Attachment's list of accomplishments will reveal a large number of projects and activities were undertaken, and they yielded rich results in services that our veterans never dreamed they would ever have and benefits they never thought possible.

Probably the greatest personal satisfaction I have had these past six years has come from the smile I got when I helped a veteran or his family with a problem, the firm handshake of a tearful veteran "graduate" when he got his high school diploma, the tears shed unashamedly when a veteran got his long awaited medal earned in bloody fighting, the joy expressed by women who served in the armed forces overseas in wartime upon learning for the first time the honored title "veteran" is not reserved only for male members of the services, or the quiet "thank you" and a tear drop in the eye of a widow who learned for the first time she was eligible to have her meager income supplemented with a benefit her deceased husband had earned for her. How does one put a dollar amount on those moments? I don't know, but I wouldn't take a million dollars for the feeling of self-worth and satisfaction I experienced from any one of those moments.

I am grateful, therefore, for the opportunity afforded me by my service on the Wyoming Veterans' Commission from 1994 to date. It will be a privilege long remembered. The support given me by those in government and by the vast majority of veterans who also are committed to the concept of serving all 57,000 veterans in our state is something I will always cherish.

This brings me to the next point of this letter, and that is to tender my resignation from the

Commission effective 1 September 2003. That way I can put out the August issue of WY-VETS NEWS for which I have accumulated material and wind up several items of unfinished business. Of course, I will assist the new editor in getting started on the September issue as he or she “breaks into” the job. It would be patently unfair for me to remain on the Commission always appearing to be “second guessing” my successor.

What will I do with all of this newfound time? First, will be to get the physical examinations, etc. done that my VA doctor ordered last October, get the dental care done that is over a year late and all of the other personal things that have had to be put on hold so that the Commission’s work could be kept current. I will continue to be available, of course, to speak around the state at public functions on veterans and military history, and I will probably continue to write, contributing articles from time to time to WY-VETS NEWS. Naturally, I will always be available to consult when needed by the Commission. Otherwise, most of my time will be spent getting reacquainted with my family, my grandchildren and my many friends.

The Attachment mentioned in the letter, which briefly describes many, but not all, of the major accomplishments, programs and activities of the Commission, written chronologically and not in order of importance, is not reprinted here. It is 26 pages long, single-spaced and would unduly extend the length of this longest ever issue of WY-VETS NEWS. We will be happy to send a copy to anyone that requests it. Indeed, we encourage everyone interested in reading an abbreviated version of the exciting things achieved, despite limited money and personnel resources over this short six-year span, to contact the state office for a copy.

In closing, let me once again thank the hard working Commissioners, the WVC staff and members of veterans organizations that pitched in and were part of the team that accomplished these things. No one person, nor group of people, is capable of getting this much done by himself or themselves with only limited resources over such a short period of time. It takes the support and help of everyone who is genuinely interested in helping veterans. That’s the name of the game: Doing FOR veterans -- expending all available energy solely for this critically important goal.

I humbly say to all of you, “Thank you for what we did together for the 57,000 veterans of Wyoming. They might not know exactly what we did, but they know a lot of things have been happening that never happened before in Wyoming.”

BOB PALMER NEW
COMMISSION CHAIRMAN

The organizational meeting of the new Commission comprised of nine reappointed and three appointed Commissioners held on the regular monthly meeting date of 18 July resulted in a complete turnover of officers. The chairmanship for which long time Chairman Stan Lowe announced he would not run this time was filled by District 1 Commissioner Robert I. Palmer, Sr., Cheyenne, and District 8 Commissioner Dorothy Boam, Glenrock, was chosen

for the Secretary’s position formerly held by District 5 Commissioner Todd E. White, Worland. White had announced earlier he could not run for re-election since he is due to be elected a national officer, National Vice Commander, of The American Legion this month in St. Louis. Lowe also announced at that meeting he would resign from the Commission this year effective 1 September in fairness to the new chairman that would succeed him.

Palmer, born in neighboring Montana, moved with his family to Cheyenne when he was 16 and has lived there ever since except when serving in the Navy beginning in 1945 during WW II and again in 1950 in the Korean War. He graduated from Cheyenne High School in 1945. In WW II, he served aboard the *USS COWPENS CVL-25* in the Pacific and later pulled shore duty in Pearl Harbor. He ended up in the Fleet Air Detachment Garage where he learned what would become his lifelong trade as an auto mechanic.

Returning home to Cheyenne, he worked as a helper in the repair shop at F. E. Warren AFB. Called again to duty in Korea, he was on LST 1101 serving as a Motor Machinist Mate Second Class (MOMMM 2/c). One of several parts he had in that war was landing troops and matériel with his LST during MacArthur’s brilliantly conceived and executed invasion at Inchon that cut off and literally decimated the North Korean Army.

Going back home to Cheyenne after Korea, he returned to his job at the Air Force Base where he worked up from mechanic to lead man, foreman and finally superintendent. After retirement, he engaged in his auto repair business, Palmer Auto Service, Inc., which continues to be operated by Robert Jr. today.

He was married in Cheyenne in 1952. Last year he and his lovely wife Orlee celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary with their three children, Melanie, Robert Jr. and H. August, and other family members and many friends.

Boam is a Wyoming native born in Elk Basin near Sheridan and raised in Superior where she graduated from Junior High and High School. In 1947 she and John W. Boam of Superior were married and moved to Casper in 1952. Her late husband served in the United States Coast Guard during WW II, from June 1941 to July 1946, as a radioman aboard Coast Guard ships.

Her father, Claud H. Franklin, a WW I Army Corporal who was wounded in France, signed her up at age 6 for membership in The American Legion Auxiliary. In later years, money concerns forced her to end her membership temporarily. After a few years she joined again in 1956 and has been very active. She went through the committee chairs and all local unit and district offices as well as Wyoming Department offices, serving as Department President 1975-76. Also, she was Northwest Division Vice President 1983-84 (moving to Glenrock from Casper during that time), National Chaplain 1985-86, and during all of those years she served in several national committee chairs.

Her family consists of two sons, John Franklin and Claude, both of Glenrock, and daughter Elizabeth of Louisiana plus five grandchildren.

Their many friends throughout the state join in wishing Bob and Dorothy much satisfaction and many rewards from working for Wyoming’s 57,000 veterans in these very time and work demanding offices of the Commission.

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VA TO FILL PRESCRIPTIONS BY NON- VA PHYSICIANS

WASHINGTON (July 24, 2003)

Some veterans waiting to see Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) physicians for the first time may be eligible to receive medications from VA mail-out pharmacies that were prescribed by private doctors, under a new policy announced today.

"This policy should ease the minds of veterans with pharmaceutical needs who have been waiting too long for their first appointment," said Secretary of Veterans Affairs Anthony J. Principi. "This decision will help these veterans while preserving our ability to serve others."

To be eligible for the new benefit, veterans must meet all of the following conditions:

- * Have enrolled in VA health care before July 25, 2003, and
- * Requested their first primary care appointment with VA before July 25, 2003, and
- * Must be waiting more than 30 days for their first appointment with a primary care physician on Sept. 22, 2003.

The first prescriptions will be filled under the new program on September 22. Eligible veterans will be unable to get prescriptions filled before that date. The period between announcement of the program (July 24) and filling the first prescriptions (Sept. 22) is necessary to allow VA to identify and contact eligible veterans and to put new systems and procedures in place to deliver this benefit.

Principi stressed the policy is a short-term measure to assist veterans who were enrolled and waiting for the appointment before July 25, when details about the new benefit will be published in the Federal Register. It will not apply to veterans who are put on the waiting list after July 24. VA estimates that 200,000 veterans will be eligible for the benefit.

"Traditionally, an examination and a prescription -- both by a VA physician -- have been required before VA would provide pharmacy benefits to veterans," Principi said. "By improving the process of giving veterans the medication they're seeking, we can enhance their health care treatment and reduce the waiting lists for everyone."

Veterans covered by the new rule will receive information by mail from their nearest VA medical facility about filling prescriptions by mail from non-VA doctors, including information for the doctors themselves.

Principi credited Reps. John Mica (R-Fla.) and Rob Simmons (R-Conn.) with "playing an important role in launching this new benefit due to their keen interest in improving prescription coverage for veterans."

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100 COMPANIES JOIN VETERANS FRANCHISE PROGRAM

ExxonMobil recently became the 100th company to join the Veterans Transition Franchise Initiative, commonly known as "VetFran," which makes obtaining a franchise more affordable for veterans.

Dr. Leo S. Mackay Jr., Deputy Secretary of Veterans Affairs said, "I am encouraged that so many corporations have chosen to thank veterans by helping place the dream of business ownership within their reach."

The International Franchise Association (IFA) first introduced VetFran in the early 1990s as a way for franchisers to express gratitude to military members for their service during the first Gulf War. The program was re-introduced last September. The 100 companies offering VetFran discounts to veterans represent a broad range of small-business ownership opportunities, including restaurant, retail, service and technology franchises.

More than a dozen veterans have acquired franchises through the VetFran program during the past year, and applications are now being considered from about two dozen other veterans.

Many VetFran franchisers allow veterans to acquire a franchise with a down payment of 10 percent or less of the initial franchise cost, which generally ranges from \$45,000 to \$150,000 for a small business. Beginning July 1, ExxonMobil will provide a one-time waiver of up to \$5,000 for certain training fees to any qualified honorably discharged veteran who has been identified for training to operate a specific Exxon or Mobil franchise dealer site.

"Today's young men and women who are in the cockpits of our frontline fighters, on the decks of our fighting ships and in the turrets of our main battle tanks will be the veterans of tomorrow," said Mackay. "VetFran offers the means by which many of them can create a meaningful civilian career when they put aside their uniforms."

Additional information for veterans and companies interested in participating in the VetFran program can be found at <http://www.franchise.org> on the Internet. For information about other business opportunities and programs for veterans, visit VA's Center for Veterans Enterprise Web page at <http://www.vetbiz.org>

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BILLY AND THE KOREAN WAR ORPHAN

Byond doubt, the most moving human interest story to come out of the Korean War involved 12 year-old Baik Sung-Hak, one of over 100,000 orphans that roamed the countryside, and his benefactor he called Billy who served with the famous Wyoming Army National Guard's 300th Armored Field Artillery. Baik was subsisting off garbage thrown away by the

soldiers of the 300th. They made him a “washy-washy boy” to do laundry, clean latrines and run errands at no pay except meals, candy, gum and a place to sleep.

Billy, an orphan himself who had been raised successively by two fine, church-going women, was shy and gentle, never swearing or raising his voice. He looked upon Baik, whom he called by his given name Hak, as his younger brother. He taught him English, took care of him when he was sick, comforted him when the nightmares of the war frightened him, and found him a cot so he could sleep nearby.

One day, while Baik was standing on a stream bank, an enemy shell hit a gas tank, spraying burning gasoline over him. He jumped in the river, Billy grabbed him and put out the fire, but Baik was badly burned and unconscious. Billy rushed him to a first aid station. Baik did not regain consciousness for 18 hours. He was helicoptered to a M*A*S*H hospital to treat his extensive burns. Some time later he opened his eyes to see Billy standing by his bed and assuring him he would get well.

After three months, Baik recovered enough to return to the 300th. At Christmas Billy gave the boy a box. In it were a warm jacket, pants, shirts, shoes, etc. to replace the oversized military uniform he was wearing. Billy had asked one of his former “moms” to buy and send them.

Baik’s world was shattered a few days later when all “washy-washy boys” under 15 were sent to orphanages. After the armistice was signed July 27, 1953 the men in the 300th returned home. One day, Baik inquired about Billy only to learn the man that had taught him to be honest and good had gone.

At age 14, now completely recovered from his burns, Baik got a janitorial job and later worked for a company that made baseball caps. By his 18th birthday, he was managing two stores and a factory. At 19, he started a cap manufacturing business of his own, working until midnight making caps and running the store days. He soon began hiring help and expanding until he became one of the richest men in Korea, employing 3800 people in 19 plants in five countries including the United States. In 1989, his plants made 48 million baseball caps including more than half the caps sold in America.

Convinced that Billy’s strong moral example was the reason for his success, Baik built a \$5 million complex at Hong-Chon, the place his friend and he first met. It houses 600 orphans and elderly, handicapped and once destitute people. He named it “Billy’s House.” Later, he built similar complexes for orphans and disadvantaged people in Sri Lanka, Costa Rica, China and California.

Baik felt compelled to find Billy, but all he knew about him was the bucking horse emblem of his unit. Trying to identify Billy, who had rotated into the 300th from the regular Army, became a major national search. Involved were some veterans of the 300th, a retired investigator and a *Reader’s Digest* writer, David Reed, who did two articles, “The Search for Billy” in that magazine’s June 1986 and February 1990 issues. A reunion of the 300th’s Battery A, Billy’s outfit, was organized with a request to bring photos from the war. Billy was identified in one of them, but Baik had misinterpreted his real name Beattie to be Billy.

David Beattie, a night janitor earning \$8/hour operating a freight elevator and manhandling drums of trash onto a loading dock in downtown Philadelphia, was soon located. Upon receiving the

call, Baik was in the air three hours later headed for Philadelphia, one of several trips made during the search.

Arriving in 18 hours, he was driven by Reed to Beattie’s modest home. “I’m nervous,” Baik said. Reed told him to wait until he brought Beattie outside. “What’ll I call him? Mister?” asked an apprehensive Beattie. “Call him what you used to call him – Hak,” Reed replied.

Beattie stepped out into the sunlight. The two men stood looking at each other, then solemnly shook hands. For six emotionally draining hours the multimillionaire and the night shift janitor sat talking at Beattie’s kitchen table. Baik wanted to help Beattie financially, but he would have none of it. Perhaps send his daughter Dorothy to nursing school and son Tommy to college? A generous, appreciated gesture.

The real significance of this reunion was common decency rooted in the teachings of two highly principled foster mothers and imparted by an ordinary GI to a homeless Korean boy and shared with hundreds of unfortunate people was a rich enough reward.

[Reprinted from “Vets Hotline” by Stan Lowe, *CASPER JOURNAL*, July 24, 2003.]

THE DIRECTOR’S REPORT

by

Donald L. Ewing, State Director,
Wyoming Veterans’ Commission

The month of July was quite exciting. Early in the month I attended a meeting of Veteran Service Organizations Commanders in Cheyenne on July 9th. The discussion was primarily on how the Commission and the various Organizations could improve communication and working relationships. After this meeting, our group joined the Commissioners at a Commission meeting called by Governor Freudenthal in his office. The Governor expressed a strong desire that all our organizations forget the past and work for the future, and that we must all work together for our veterans.

During this month I attended two meetings with the Northern Arapahoe Tribal Veterans’ Representative (TVR), “Al” Addison. In these meetings we discussed the successes at the May 2003 Forward Arrow clinic in Ethete and worked on ways to improve it. Mr. Addison has completed several veteran service training sessions and is actively working on moving Tribal claims through the system. We discussed a possible meeting at the Cheyenne VAMC in late August. The Tribal Council is looking at inviting Forward Arrow back for a follow up visit later this year. They say this “return” strategy has worked well in Montana where it is reported that approximately 10 new American Indian claims are filed each week, and it is felt that our Wyoming American Indian brothers could benefit from this second clinic.

Several of our commissioners as well as Chairman Stan Lowe, Barry Gasdek, State Veterans’ Service Officer and I attended the 85th Annual American Legion Department Convention in Casper over the June 28th weekend. This was a very positive and rewarding convention in that not only were

many good reports heard, but also a good time was had by all.

On Monday, July 7th, MG Ed Wright, the Adjutant General, presented a purple heart to Mr. James Smathers, a WW II veteran that was wounded by a wooden German bullet during WW II and suffered from the freezing cold in the Battle of the Bulge. It was almost 60 years late, but Mr. Smathers was very pleased. The ceremony was well attended by visitors as well as a large family contingent.

During the same week, the Casper Army Air Base Reunion was held in Casper. During this reunion, I made a Power Point presentation to this group that was well received covering the renovations at the Wyoming Veterans' Memorial Museum. Those veterans and their families were pleased their donations had a part in building a museum to honor those that trained at the Casper Army Air Base as well as a museum to honor all Wyoming veterans.

The Museum is coming along nicely. At our Advisory Board meeting on July 29, we revisited the desired look of the museum and determined that, at this time, we should be displaying memorabilia only, which is scheduled to be changed every 8-12 months. We are waiting on the proper outdoor lights that will illuminate the flags, and once they are installed, the flags will be flying. The outside window trim and the remaining 10 windows are being installed, and exterior painting will commence shortly. Veterans, this is your only state veterans' museum, so please make it a MUST SEE ATTRACTION. Keep in mind that the museum is normally open Thursday through Sunday, from 12 noon until 5pm, but tours may be scheduled at other times by contacting Joye Kading at 237-9511.

COMBAT RELATED SERVICE CONNECTION DISABILITY:

Of late, there has been much press about Combat-related service-connected disabilities (CRSC) that are a direct result of armed conflict or conditions that simulate combat, or result from the performance of uniquely hazardous military duties, or were caused by an instrumentality of war.

Basic CRSC criteria require that the retiree: 1. Had 20 or more years of service in the Uniformed Services for purposes of computing the amount of retire pay; 2. Is in retired status, 3. Is entitled to retire pay, and 4. Has qualified disability ratings (percentages). The burden of proof that a disability is combat-related rests with the applicant who will be required to provide documents. CRSC claims for MST (psychiatric condition derived from sexual trauma -- typically PTSD) will be reviewed on a case-by-case basis. C&P Service Fast Letter 03-19 indicates that each service department has a review board to adjudicate CRSC claims. Issues such as whether the sexual assault was caused by U.S. or enemy forces, or if the claimant was a POW at the time of the assault, would obviously be considered. The CRSC outcome will be determined by the adjudicating military service department (not VA). MST can apply to females and males. For information on DOD's CRSC program, visit www.defenselink.mil/prhome/crsc/html.

AGENT ORANGE OUTSIDE OF VIETNAM: During the March 2003 VSCM call, we provided information regarding the use of Agent Orange in Korea along the DMZ, including the units in the area during the period in which Agent Orange

was sprayed. DoD has provided a correction to two of the cited units. Previously reported as the 109th and 209th Infantry, those units were actually the 1/9th and 2/9th Infantry. A corrected listing of units follows:

The four combat brigades of the 2nd Infantry Division; 1/38th Infantry; 2/38th Infantry; 1/23rd Infantry; 2/23rd Infantry; 3/23rd Infantry; 3/32nd Infantry; 1/9th Infantry; 2/9th Infantry; 1/72nd Armor; 2/72nd Armor; 4th/7th Cavalry.

3rd Brigade of the 7th Infantry Division; 1/17th Infantry; 2/17th Infantry; 1/73rd Armor; 2/10th Cavalry

If a claim is received from a veteran who alleges service at the DMZ during the period April 1968 to July 1969, and who was assigned to one of the above units, exposure to herbicides will be conceded. Therefore, C&P Service will not be contacted in these cases.

For all other claims of herbicide exposure, the claimant will be asked to provide a detailed description of the exposure, including the location, approximate date(s) and nature of the exposure. Other proof of exposure will be requested as well, such as "buddy" statements, photographs taken during service or letters written during service.

MEANS TEST:

It is very important to remember that all veterans enrolled in VA health care must complete a "Means Test" every year, usually due on the anniversary of their enrollment date.

What is a "Means Test"? It is a report of the enrolled veteran's financial "Means" to qualify for VA health care. This information used to be voluntary prior to January 17, 2003. A veteran could opt to decline reporting their financial means and just agree to pay the co-pay fees.

This is no longer the case. All veteran enrolled in VA health care must now report their financial "Means" every year. The only exception is for veterans with 50% or more service-connected disabilities and certain other veterans such as recipients of Purple Hearts, etc.

MEANS TEST REQUIRED

Failure to make this all-important report could mean the veterans will be dropped from active patient status in VA health care. After two years, you could be dropped completely from VA health care, and may not be able to get back in, depending on your income status as a "new" enrollee.

INFORMATION NEEDED

To answer the Means Test question you need to know your gross annual income from the previous tax year, value of any real estate owned besides your primary home (your residence does not count), any "out of pocket" medical expenses. Medical expenses include dental as well as doctor expense for you and your spouse, and for those of you on Medicare, the deduction from your Social Security for Part B of Medicare, usually around \$55 or so. This deduction amount is on your Social Security statement you receive every year. There are a few other easily answered questions regarding assets, etc. Close estimates are ok.

As of January 17, a veteran enrolling for the first time must meet certain income standards to qualify for VA health care. Up until that date all veterans could enroll in VA health care, regardless of their income.

INCOME RULES

The rule of thumb to qualify for VA health care after that date is an income below about \$28,000 for a single veteran with no dependents. A veteran with one dependent can make about \$29,500 income or less and qualify for VA health care. Also coming into play is a veteran's assets, real estate owned and other valuable assets. In other words, if you make over those amounts you generally will not be able to enroll in VA health care at this time.

As I have often mentioned here, I expect these rules to change in the near future, so I urge all veterans to enroll in VA health care whether they think they financially qualify or not. This gets you into the VA computer systems and then when these financial requirements change you may be one step ahead to obtain VA health care.

RULES COULD CHANGE

A lot of intense pressure is being brought to bear on the VA and Congress to rescind these new income-based rules and go back to allowing almost any veteran with an honorable discharge to enroll in VA health care.

One of the big arguments in support of going back to the pre-September 17 rules is it is more cost effective to provide preventative health care, rather than deal with a veteran's declining health issues at a later date.

SERVICE WITH A SMILE

By

Barry D. Gasdek,

Wyoming State Veteran's Service Officer

July reinforced what we have all fought for and how veteran's service to this great country has made America what it is today. I was taken by the content of a letter sent to a veteran's family, who had just been killed in action during World War II. It stated, "that he died in service of his country" and that "he stands in the unbroken line of patriots who have dared to die that freedom might live, and grow, and increase its blessings. Freedom lives and through it he lives-in a way that humbles the undertakings of most men." It was signed by Franklin D. Roosevelt, President of the United States of America.

The first week in July, I attended the "Freedom has a Birthday" celebration in Laramie's Washington Park, on the 4th of July. There were a lot of Veterans present throughout the day and I talked to 117 or more veterans with Commissioner Joe Sestak. Veterans that stopped by the table received some kind of information, forms or handouts on benefits and an update on the benefits that were recently passed by the Wyoming legislature. Joe and I personally thanked each veteran for his service to our great country. This included spouses, children and other family members.

I attended the Wyoming Veterans Memorial Committee meeting in Laramie on July 9th. Everything seems to be on track for the 30 August dedication ceremony. The dedication will be at halftime during the first home game at the north end of the University of Wyoming Football Stadium. It sounds like an excellent program with many dignitaries and veterans in attendance, including the

Honorable Anthony J. Principi, Secretary of Veterans Affairs. Attended the Commission\VSO meeting with Governor Freudenthal in Cheyenne and a meeting with VSO's and Commissioner's after that, to improve the working relationship with the different veterans groups.

I attended the VSO Meeting in the Cheyenne VAMC, which included a teleconference with both the Sheridan and Denver VAMC's. I passed on the information received from Salt Lake VAMC on 164 panels opening at Green River's Castle Rock Community Based Outpatient Clinic (CBOC). I encouraged veterans to get enrolled in VA Health Care, if they were not already signed up. There had been many requests from local veterans to get additional openings for VA Health Care in the Southwestern part of the state.

I talked with Al Addison, Tribal Veterans Representative (TVR), for Northern Arapahoe Nation, Wind River Reservation. He was Tribal Council Chair for eight years prior to this position and takes his present job as TVR very seriously. He looks forward to working with both the Commission and the VSO's in assisting the American Indians and other veterans.

This past week visited veterans in Rawlins, Encampment, Rock Springs, Pinedale, Afton, Thane and Freedom. Had a good turn out of seniors and veterans at the Senior Centers in Pinedale and Thane. Talked to the 107 attendees about what I do as a State Veterans Service Officer (VSO), where VA facilities are located throughout the state, and recent bills that passed the Wyoming Legislature. I stopped in Cokeville to pick up two headstones to return to the state veterans cemetery. These had been in the freight office since 1968. Replacement headstones were already in place at the cemetery.

I have sent out my six month planning calendar and goals to all Commissioners and VSO's. I will be coordinating with Commissioners before I visit their respective areas. Thanks for all of your assistance when I'm out and about in your communities. It really helps to be part of the network you have established so I can get local veterans information and assistance.

One of the questions I'm frequently asked by veterans is the possibility of getting VA to fill prescriptions by non-VA physicians. A recent news release by the Department of Veterans Affairs dated July 24, 2003 discusses a new VA policy that answers this question. See the article in this issue of WY-VETS NEWS, page 4, "VA to Fill Prescriptions by Non-VA Physicians" that discusses it in detail. Note especially that the first prescriptions will be filled under the new program September 22. Eligible veterans will be unable to get prescriptions filled before that date. The period between announcement of the program (July 25) and filling the first prescriptions (Sept 22) is necessary to allow VA to identify and contact eligible veterans and to put new systems and procedures in place to deliver this benefit.

Visits in August will be as follows: 5-7 Thermopolis, Cody, Powell; 11-14 Rock Springs, Cody, Sheridan, Casper; 18-20 Wheatland, Torrington, Lusk; 25-28 CVSO Training, Pierre, South Dakota.

Thanks for all you do for veterans. Thanks for serving, and thanks for being a veteran!

WYOMING VETERANS AFFAIRS COMMISSION

Minutes of May 2003 Meeting (abbreviated)

The Wyoming Veterans Affairs Commission met on Friday, May 16, 2003 via telephone conference call. The meeting convened at 9:00 a.m. with the Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag of the United States. All commissioners were present constituting a quorum:

R. Stanley Lowe, Chairman, Casper, Todd E. White, Secretary, Worland, Ted T. Adkins, Mountain View, Dorothy Boam, Glenrock, Robert I. Palmer, Sr., Cheyenne, J.W. "Jim" Ray, Riverton, Hank Ruland, Pinedale, Joseph G. Sestak, Laramie, William A. Thompson, Rock Springs, and Ronald Wood, Buffalo. Also present were Director Don Ewing and State Veterans Service Officer Barry Gasdek.

1. **Chairman's Report:** Chairman Lowe reported that Director Ewing and he attended the swearing in ceremony for the new Wyoming Adjutant General Ed Wright in Cheyenne. While in Cheyenne they met with Kathy Emmons, Director of Workforce Services and Jim Elias of Workforce Services. They discussed the positions and responsibilities of the LVER's and DVOP's related to veterans' employment. They also met with Adjutant General Wright and discussed the need for larger facilities for the Commission offices once staff is increased to meet the commission's urgent need. A suggestion was made that the Oil & Gas Conservation Commission Building in Casper will soon become vacant and the commission may wish to pursue this larger facility for a future move.
2. **Executive Session:** The Commission moved into executive session to discuss personnel matters at 9:10 a.m. and returned from executive session at 9:55 a.m.
3. **Directors Report:** Director Don Ewing reported approximately 2200 contacts by telephone calls, e-mails and walk-ins during the past month. Current expenditures for fiscal 2003 are still approximately \$6,000 over budget. Most of the expenditures are in supplies and the newsletter, which is costing between \$500.00 and \$800.00 a month to publish. Public Services Announcements are being aired on the Casper radio station, and other radio stations throughout the state are requesting copies.
4. **Veterans Service Officer Report:** Veteran Service Officer Barry Gasdek reported on his travel during the past month, which included stops in Lander, Ft. Washakie, Buffalo, Sheridan, Rawlins, Thermopolis, Worland and Basin. He also attended the Disabled American Veterans State Convention in Cheyenne.
5. **UW Veterans Plaza:** Commissioner Sestak reported that the dedication of the Veteran's Plaza at the University of Wyoming will be held on August 30, 2003 and that Secretary of Veterans Affairs, Anthony Principi will be the honored speaker.
6. **Operation Recognition:** Commissioner Boam stated that there has been some renewed interest in the Operation Recognition program since the airing of the Public Service Announcements. She suggested that consideration be given to including Vietnam Veterans and Gulf War Veterans in the program. Commissioner White stated that the Gulf War Veterans have been required to have high school diplomas before they can enlist. Additional review of the program will be undertaken and a report made in the future.

(At this point, Secretary Todd White had to leave the meeting, and Director Ewing was appointed acting Secretary to keep the minutes of the remainder of the meeting).

7. **Miscellaneous Business:** A couple items of miscellaneous routine business dealing with office equipment and sources of replacement, etc. were discussed without any action taken on them.
8. **Adjournment:** Chairman Lowe called for any other business to come before this meeting. Hearing none, he declared the meeting adjourned.

Todd E. White,
Secretary

WYOMING VETERANS AFFAIRS COMMISSION

Minutes of June 2003 Meeting (abbreviated)

The Wyoming Veterans Affairs Commission met on Friday, June 20, 2003 via telephone conference call. The meeting convened at 9:00 a.m. with the Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag of the United States.

Chairman Lowe stated he had hoped this meeting would be the organizational meeting of the new Commission so it could conduct business at this meeting, but upon inquiry Director Ewing made to the Governor's office it was learned that only two members of the new Commission had completed the qualifying procedures by filing their oaths of office. Therefore, no quorum could be had of the new Commission. A quorum did exist of members of the old Commission, so instead he would convene a meeting of the old Commission to hear reports and take care of end of term left over business.

The following commissioners of the old Commission were present: R. Stanley Lowe, Chairman, Casper; Todd E. White, Secretary, Worland; Ted T. Adkins, Mountain View; Dorothy Boam, Glenrock; Robert Palmer, Cheyenne (absent); J.W. "Jim" Ray, Riverton; Hank Ruland, Pinedale (absent); Joe Sestak, Laramie; William Thompson, Rock Springs; Ron Wood, Buffalo.

Also present were Director Don Ewing, Bob DeBernardo and Dave McNulty.

1. **Veterans Service Officer's Report:** Director Ewing stated that Veteran Service Officer Barry Gasdek is currently attending the National Association of County Service Officers school. He reported on Barry's travel during the past month, which included stops in Ethete, Lander, Casper, Laramie and Gillette.
2. **Director's Report:** Director Don Ewing welcomed newly appointed Commissioners to the new Commission, Bob DeBernardo of Casper, Pete Quinnell of Gillette and Bob Leonard of Laramie. Director Ewing reported he had attended one day of the Forward Arrow program at Ethete, the VFW Convention in Gillette and he and Chairman Lowe met with Adjutant General Wright in Cheyenne. They discussed the upcoming budget for the Commission and employees and emphasized the need for an executive secretary and an employee to handle legislative issues, grant writing, and public relations. He also stated that an alternative source of income for the Commission has to be pursued.
3. **Chairman's Report:** Chairman Lowe reported he sent a letter to Adjutant General Wright and to the new director of the Health Department encouraging them to continue working with the state veterans nursing home study committee. Chairman Lowe stated he had received a letter from the VFW State Commander asking for our support to encourage the VA to allow the Sheridan VAMC rather than the Salt Lake VAMC to establish and operate a CBOC in Afton. Commissioner Sestak moved that we support the

Sheridan VAMC establishing and operating a CBOC in Afton. Second by Commissioner Boam. Motion carried.

Chairman Lowe then gave a background on a meeting held with the Joint Transportation Committee in Douglas. After discussion the following action was taken. Commissioner Sestak moved that the state education benefits for Wyoming Vietnam Veterans be expanded to include all Wyoming military veterans. Second by Commissioner Thompson. Motion carried. Commissioner Boam moved that the Commission support legislation to modify the existing Veteran Burial Team law to clarify the payment of funds to an organization without requiring expense invoices. Second by Commissioner White. Motion carried. Commissioner Wood moved that the Commission support legislation to confer Veteran Status on National Guardsmen when federally mobilized regardless of length of time of mobilization. Second by Commissioner Adkins. Motion carried. Commissioner White recommended that additional information be furnished on seeking legislation for Rule Making Authority by the Commission prior to any formal policy decision.

Chairman Lowe advised the commissioners to review the new legislation in detail in order to assist in answering any questions that may arise from veterans in their areas. Chairman Lowe also clarified the state law on flying a POW/MIA flag on all state, county and city buildings is encouraged but is not mandatory. Applications for the 50% disabled fishing licenses have been sent to all VFW and American Legion Posts. The 50% disabled state park admittance forms were given out at the VFW State Convention and will be given out at the American Legion State Convention. Chairman Lowe stated a general mailing to all VSO posts will be made to transmit the application forms for state park permits.

4. State Veterans Museum: Director Ewing stated that the new flagpoles have been installed at the state veterans museum.

5. UW Veterans Plaza: Commissioner Sestak reported that construction of the Veteran's Plaza at the University of Wyoming is almost complete and the dedication will be held on August 30, 2003 with Secretary of Veterans Affairs, Anthony Principi as honored speaker.

6. Miscellaneous Business: Dave McNulty reported to the Commission on the Forward Arrow program, which was held on the Wind River Indian Reservation. He thought the two week program was generally successful and suggested a similar program made up of the Commission, VSO's, LVER's and DVOP's be considered for a three or four day blitz in selected areas of the state to assist veterans.

Commissioner Thompson advised the commission that the VA Benefits Section will be holding benefit assistance programs in Rock Springs, Cody, Casper and Gillette on August 11 through August 15.

Commissioner White advised the commission that recent information in the media indicates that all offices of the Red Cross will be closing throughout Wyoming. The Red Cross is the only official contact for emergency leave for active military personnel. Chairman Lowe will discuss with Adjutant General Wright.

7. Future Meetings: After discussion on telephone conference meetings, it was moved by Commissioner Boam that the Commission conduct quarterly face-to-face meetings with telephone conference meetings to be held as necessary at the call of the Chairman. Second by Commissioner Thompson, motion carried.

8. The Commission moved into executive session to discuss personnel matters at 10:05 a.m. and returned from executive session at 10:20 a.m.

9. Chairman Lowe extended his appreciation to Commissioner Ted Adkins for his involvement as Commissioner for the Wyoming Veteran's Affairs Commission and stated that he hoped that he will

continue to provide input to the commission even though he will no longer be a commissioner.

10. The Meeting was adjourned at 10:25 a.m.

Todd E. White,
Secretary

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WYOMING VETERANS **COMMISSION**

Minutes of July 2003 Meeting (abbreviated)

The Wyoming Veterans Commission met on Friday, July 18, 2003 via telephone conference call. The meeting convened at 9:00 a.m. with the Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag of the United States. The following Commissioners were present constituting a quorum: R. Stanley Lowe, Chairman, Casper, Todd E. White, Secretary, Worland, Dorothy Boam, Glenrock, Robert "Bob" DeBernardo, Casper, Robert H. Leonard, Laramie, Robert I. Palmer, Sr., Cheyenne, Pete Quinnell, Gillette, J.W. "Jim" Ray, Riverton, Hank Ruland, Pinedale (absent), Joseph G. Sestak, Laramie, William A. Thompson, Rock Springs, and Ronald Wood, Buffalo. Also present were Director Don Ewing, Veteran Service Officer Barry Gasdek, The American Legion Department Commander Barbara Eastridge, Disabled American Veterans Department Commander Don Neville, and Disabled American Veterans Auxiliary Department Commander Pat Neville

1. Elections: Chairman Lowe stated he is resigning from the Commission effective September 1 and would not seek the position of Chairman. He then opened the floor for nominations for Chairman. Commissioner Quinnell nominated Commissioner DeBernardo. Commissioner Leonard nominated Commissioner Palmer. It was decided to use a secret ballot. Upon counting the secret ballots, Commissioner Robert I. Palmer, Sr. was declared elected Chairman for 2003 - 2005. Commissioner Palmer thanked everyone and stated he will try to do his best to continue the positive contributions of the Commission to the Governor, Legislature and the Veterans. He also thanked Chairman Lowe for his outstanding contribution to the veterans of Wyoming while serving as chairman, and a standing ovation was given to Chairman Lowe. Chairman-elect Palmer declared that he wanted the commission and others to bury their differences and from now on would work together as a group with one purpose in mind, to help veterans.

Chairman Lowe opened the floor for nominations for Secretary. Commissioner Palmer nominated Commissioner White who stated he had previously advised the commission he would not be able to continue as Secretary for the next two years. Commissioner Sestak nominated Commissioner Wood who declined. Commissioner Quinnell nominated Commissioner DeBernardo who declined. Commissioner Leonard nominated Commissioner Sestak who declined. Commissioner Sestak nominated Commissioner Boam. With no further nominations, Commissioner Palmer moved and Commissioner Wood seconded that Commissioner Boam be unanimously elected Secretary for 2003 - 2005. Motion carried.

2. Commission Meetings: Chairman Lowe stated that the Commission should confirm future face-to-face meetings. Commissioner Leonard moved to have four face-to-face meetings at various locations during the coming year. Second by Commissioner Wood. Motion carried. Commissioner Leonard moved and Commissioner Wood seconded that telephone conference calls be audiotaped and then transcribed. After discussion it was determined that additional information is needed about transcribing. Motion and

second were withdrawn. After a review of the calendar it was moved by Commissioner Boam and second by Commissioner Wood to have a face-to-face meeting on September 13, 2003 at Post #2, The American Legion in Casper beginning at 10:00 a.m. Motion carried.

3. Operation Recognition: Commissioner Boam reported she has received 2 applications for high school diplomas and that she will be meeting with the Board of Education to help promote the program. She also recommended that Vietnam Veterans be included in the Operation Recognition program. Commissioner Leonard asked what the program was about and Commissioner Boam and Chairman Lowe described the program of providing High School Diploma's to veterans who quit high school to go into the armed forces.

4. UW Veterans Plaza: Commissioner Sestak reported that construction of the Veterans' Memorial Plaza at the University of Wyoming is complete. The dedication will be held during halftime of the Wyoming – Montana State football game on August 30, 2003 with Secretary of Veterans Affairs Anthony Principi as honored speaker. A reception will be held at the War Memorial Fieldhouse Trophy Room on August 29, 2003. He stated that any commissioners planning on attending should contact him for tickets.

5. Director's Report: Director Ewing reported that the office computer is crashing and will need to be replaced. It will not handle e-mail at this time. He stated that he assisted State Service Officer Gasdek and Commissioner Sestak at a veterans table in Laramie, attended The American Legion convention in Casper, a Purple Heart ceremony in Douglas, and the Governor's meeting in Cheyenne. He then gave an overview of the proposed budget.

(At this point in the meeting, Secretary Todd White had to withdraw to attend a funeral, and Secretary-elect Dorothy Boam kept the minutes.)

Commissioner DeBernardo moved that Don Ewing present the Commissioners with a program as to where we stand and where we intend to go and what has been accomplished so far. After an explanation from Stan Lowe that he has finalized a draft of these exact things, and after it was suggested it be sent to all VSO's, Mr. DeBernardo withdrew his motion.

Publicity was discussed and some local newspapers refuse to put items we present or release in their newspapers. It was suggested that news releases be delivered personally and emphasis be put on the importance that this news is to the public.

Mr. Ewing has drawn up a budget to be presented to the Governor and The Adjutant General Ed Wright, which includes funding for our programs, meetings, office equipment, staff, travel, and etc.

Mr. Ewing reported our e-mail is not working, the computers are antique, out dated and full. He said that Forward Arrow will be in Casper to speak to the Native Americans. He had the minutes of the meeting in Cheyenne with the Governor distributed to the Commission. He said the Governor has allocated \$4000 for each of the four meetings the commission will have, beginning in September.

6. Miscellaneous Business: Commissioner DeBernardo suggested we have the names and addresses updated on the newsletter to be sure that money is not wasted on persons who have moved or changed addresses without notifying us.

Mr. Ewing again stressed that all news had by the VSO's should be sent in for printing in the newsletter. He also asked if anyone had any ideas that would help replacing the hours that Mr. Lowe puts in on the work of this commission. We will have a hard time getting help that is reliable and constant as Mr. Lowe has been.

Commissioner Leonard questioned our support of the Forward Arrow Indian group that we have helped in several instances on our Indian Reservations. He was told that we were asked to participate and that the

Indians have every right to choose their own representatives. All we are doing is offering our help to the Indian Veterans. Mr. DeBernardo said that the National VFW is looking into the Forward Arrow Group and suggested we be very careful of our involvement with them. This issue will again be addressed at the September meeting.

7. Next Meeting Date: Next phone conference will be on August 15, 2003. The priorities and concerns of the commissioners should be ready to be presented to the body at that time. Chairman Lowe asked all commissioners to have their issues in writing on this date.

Commissioner DeBernardo moved that Don Ewing prepare an agenda covering work areas to address and have commissioners declare their area of interest so they can be assigned to specific duties as volunteers. 2nd by Joe Sestak, Carried.

With no further business to come before this commission meeting, the chairman declared it was adjourned.

Todd E. White,
Secretary

CHRISTY FERER'S TRIP TO BAGHDAD

by
Brig Gen Ron Rand, USAF

A note to the troops: Christy Ferer is a 9/11 widow who recently was a member of a group of celebrities (including Robert DeNiro and Kid Rock, among others) that took an Armed Forces Entertainment Office and USO-sponsored trip to Iraq to show support for the soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines still over there. Following is an e-note she sent her escorts about the experience; in her cover note, she said she intends to submit it to the NY Times for publication. It is really powerful, and very moving, and will make you proud that you have chosen to serve your country, and proud to be an American. Enjoy...and thanks as always for all you do for America's Air Force!

When I told friends about my pilgrimage to Iraq to thank the US troops the reaction was underwhelming at best. Some were blunt. "Why are YOU going there?" They could not understand why it was important for me, a 9/11 widow, to express my support for the men and women stationed today in the Gulf.

But the reason seemed clear to me. 200,000 troops have been sent halfway around the world to stabilize the kind of culture that breeds terrorists like those who I believe began World War III on September 11, 2001. Reaction was so politely negative that I began to doubt my role on the first USO / Tribeca Institute tour into newly occupied Iraq where, on average, a soldier a day is killed.

Besides, with Robert De Niro, Kid Rock, Rebecca and Johns Stamos, Wayne Newton, Gary Senise, Lee Ann Wolmac, who needed me? Did they really want to hear about my husband, Neil Levin, who went to work as director of New York Port Authority on Sept. 11th and never came home?

How would they relate to the two other widows traveling with me? Ginny Bauer, a New Jersey homemaker and the mother of three who lost her husband David, and former Marine Jon Vigiano who lost his only sons, Jon, a firefighter and Joe, a policeman.

As we were choppered over deserts that looked like bleached bread crumbs I wondered if I'd feel like a street hawker, passing out Port Authority pins and baseball caps as I said "thank you" to the troops. Would a hug from me mean anything at all in the presence of the Dallas Cowboy cheerleaders and a Victoria Secrets model?

We arrived at the first "meet and greet" that made me weep. (Why?) Armed with M16s and saddlebags of water in 120 degree heat, the soldiers swarmed over the stars for photo and autographs.

When it was announced that a trio of 9/11 family members was also in the tent it was as if a psychic cork on emotional dam was popped. Soldiers from every corner of New York, Long Island and Queens rushed toward us to express their condolences. Some wanted to touch us, as if they needed a physical connection to our sorrow and for some living proof for why they were there.

One mother of two from Montana told me she signed up because of 9/11. Dozens of others told us the same thing. One young soldier showed me his metal bracelet engraved with the name of a victim he never knew and that awful date none of us will ever forget.

In fact, at every encounter with the troops there would be a surge of reservists -firefighters and cops including many who had worked the rubble of Ground Zero, came to exchange a hometown hug. Their glassy eyes still do not allow anyone to penetrate too far inside to the place where their trauma is lodged; the trauma of a devastation far greater than anyone who hadn't been there could even imagine. It's there in me, too. I had forced my way downtown on that awful morning, convinced that I could find Neil beneath the rubble.

What I was not prepared for was to have soldiers show us the World Trade Center memorabilia they'd carried with them into the streets of Baghdad. Others had clearly been holding in stories of personal 9/11 tragedies, which had made them enlist.

USO handlers moved us from one corner to the next so everyone could meet us. One fire brigade plucked the 9/11 group from the crowd, transporting us to their firehouse to call on those who had to stand guard during the Baghdad concert. It was all about touching us and feeling the reason they were in this hell. Back at Saddam Hussein airport Kid Rock turned a "meet and greet" into an impromptu concert in a steamy airport hangar before 5000 troops.

Capt. Vargas from the Bronx tapped me on the back. He enlisted in the Army after some of his wife's best friends were lost at the World Trade Center. When he glimpsed the piece of recovered metal from the Towers that I had been showing to a group of soldiers he grasped for it as if it were the Holy Grail. Then he handed it to Kid Rock who passed the precious metal through the 5000 troops in the audience. They lunged at the opportunity to touch the steel that symbolized what so many of them felt was the purpose of their mission-which puts them at risk every day in the 116 degree heat and not knowing if a sniper was going to strike at anytime.

Looking into that sea of khaki gave me chills even in that blistering heat. To me, those troops were there to avenge the murder of my husband and 3 thousand others. When I got to the microphone I told them we had not made this journey for condolences but to thank them and to tell them that the families of 9/11 think of them every day. They lift our hearts. The crowd interrupted me with chants of " USA, USA, USA." Many wept.

What happened next left no doubt that the troops drew inspiration from our tragedies. When I was first asked to speak to thousands of troops in Qatar, after Iraq, I wondered if it would feel like a "grief for sale" spectacle. But this time I was quaking because I was to present the recovered WTC recovered steel to General Tommy Franks. I quivered as I handed him the icy gray block of steel. His great craggy eyes welled up with tears. The sea of khaki fell silent. Then the proud four-star general was unable to hold back the tears, which streamed down his face on center stage before 4,000 troops. As this mighty man turned from the spotlight to regain his composure I comforted him with a hug.

Now, when do I return?

VETS' CALENDAR
MEETINGS OF THE WYOMING
VETERANS' AFFAIRS COMMISSION

Meetings are on third Friday every month unless otherwise scheduled. Held via conference telephone calls (CTC) beginning at 0900 hours. Veterans and other interested persons are invited to meet with Commissioners during calls or meet in the state office. Schedule through September 2003 is: 15 Aug (CTC); and 13 Sept (American Legion, Post 2, Casper). Watch future publications for changes.

GRATEFUL ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The following donations to the WVAC for helping the vets of Wyoming are appreciated very much. Continuing past practices, these checks were sent to the Wyoming State Auditor for deposit in a special account for WVAC funds maintained by that office:

\$50	The Retired Enlisted Assn., Chap. 46, Cheyenne
\$100	Archie Hay Post No. 24, American Legion, Rock Springs
\$50	Clay Fuller & Nikki Bridgmon, Laramie
\$50	H. J. Leik, DAV Auxiliary, Casper
\$40	City of Casper: In Memory of Inez Walsh Whetstine
\$50	James J. Phelan, Jr., Cheyenne
\$20	David W. McNulty, Casper
\$75	Alcova Booster Club, Alcova
\$25	Arthur L. Rymill, Casper
\$25	VFW Post 3511, Lusk, in Memory of Mrs. Stan (Pat) Lowe
\$25	Dennis Spangler, Laramie
\$50	H.J. Leik DAV Auxiliary, Casper
\$50	Goshen County Veterans Council, Torrington
\$100	"Wrecking Crew from 42" Am. Leg. Gillette
<u>\$50</u>	Donald K. Harger, Jackson
\$760	Total

Many thanks for these generous gifts to the work of the WVAC for Wyoming's vets.

GOD BLESS AMERICA